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‘Mahayana Sutra of the Buddha: Boundless Life’

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Reflections on the various works in the exhibit

Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress

Highlights from the Rose Rare Book Collection, Sept. 29-Nov. 9, 2014

Roesch Library, University of Dayton

Mahayana Sutra of the Buddha: Boundless Life

- China, early 8th century
- Scroll from the Dunhuang caves; in Tibetan language

The scroll is from a library of thousands of scrolls and early printed texts found in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang (“Blazing Beacon”), a Han border fortress on the Silk Road established in the second century BC. The caves contained many Buddhist shrines, which accumulated a large collection of both sacred and secular texts. The collection was sealed up in a cave in the eleventh century.

Wang Yuan-lu, a Daoist monk, found them in 1900 and appointed himself guardian of the cave shrines and the library. In 1907, Sir Marc Aurel Stein acquired a large number of the scrolls and printed books from him for the British Museum by rather dodgy means.

Shortly thereafter, French archaeologist Paul Pelliot acquired many others for the Bibliothèque nationale de France in a similar manner. Most of the remainder is now in the National Library of China in Beijing. Very few scrolls have found their way into private hands. This scroll apparently remained in China until shortly before the Newberry Library in Chicago acquired it in the second

quarter of the twentieth century, possibly through the Tibetologist Berthold Laufer. It remained in the Newberry until 1994.

This scroll contains a Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit text *Arya Aparamita Ayurjnana Nama Mahayana Sutra* (*Mahayana Sutra of the Buddha: Boundless Life*). The translation was made sometime in the seventh century, and this scroll, based on the style of writing, dates to the early eighth century. Many copies of the sutra have been found around Dunhuang; the value of this scroll lies in its early date. The scroll consists of four panels of paper glued together at the edges. The quality of the paper is high, and there is writing only on one side, which is uncommon among the Dunhuang documents. This suggests that it was probably written for use in rituals; the sutra was frequently used in rituals for the prolongation of life.

—Fred W. Jenkins, PhD, Professor and Associate Dean for Collections and Operations, University Libraries

Sources

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